

‘Autistic’ Or ‘Person With Autism’? It Depends

by Michelle Diament | December 2, 2022

There are varying opinions within the autism community about the best way to describe people with the developmental disability, a new study finds.

New research dives into the heated debate surrounding the language of autism and finds that preferences about how to describe those on the spectrum vary substantially depending on who you ask.

In a study of 728 autism stakeholders, researchers sought to examine whether the term “autistic” or the phrase “person with autism” holds favor in the U.S.

Traditionally, there has been a push in the autism community toward person-first language, such as “person with autism,” in order to emphasize the strengths of the individual rather than their disability.

However, more recently, many self-advocates have started to favor so-called identity-first language — terms like “autistic” and “disabled” — as a means to embrace that the disability is an inherent part of who they are.

For the study, researchers surveyed 299 adults with autism, 81 parents of those on the spectrum, 44 family members or friends, 207 autism professionals and 97 people with no ties to the autism community.

The vast majority of adults with an autism diagnosis — 87% — preferred identity-first language such as “I am autistic” to describe themselves, according to [findings](#) published recently in the journal *Autism*.

Notably, however, the study authors point out that this leaves a “sizable minority” of individuals with autism who chose person-first language.

A majority of parents liked identity-first language best. But the trend flipped for the autism professionals and the friends and family members surveyed. People in these groups were more likely to prefer person-first terms while those with no affiliation to the autism community were pretty evenly split on whether to use person-first or identity-first language.

The takeaway, the researchers said, is how important it is for individuals to ask what members of the autism community prefer.

“Although the majority of autistic adults preferred an (identity-first language) term, with a clear preference for ‘I am autistic,’ there are others who prefer person-first terms. As with the move

toward the use of inclusive language regarding gender identity and respect for a person's personal pronouns, so too should we be mindful of the ways that individuals in the autism community prefer to communicate about their identity," wrote Amanda Taboas, Karla Doepke and Corinne Zimmerman at Illinois State University in their findings.

"Despite the absence of consensus, there exists a clear trend toward embracing autism as an identity along with identity-affirming descriptors," the study authors concluded.

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